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AUTHOR Lesesne, Teri S.
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ABSTRACT

Research shows that middle school students overwhelmingly cite three characteristics that they like in books they read: (1) humor; (2) mystery and suspense; and (3) reality (true stories about real people). Matching students with appropriate books helps turn students "on" to reading, and it is this "electric" reading that encourages lifetime readers. Educators, therefore, need to identify books whose features provide powerful reading for young adults. "Aliens for Breakfast" (1989) by J. Etra and S. Spinner, and "Maniac Magee" (1990) by Jerry Spinelli are just two examples of humorous books written for these students. Stories by Avi, such as "The True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle" (1990) and "The Man Who Was Poe" (1989) are well known to middle school students who love mystery and suspense. And students who like to read about "real" people in "real" situations will surely enjoy Susan Beth Pfeffer's "The Year without Michael" or Caroline Cooney's "The Face on the Milk Carton." Such books truly provide the electricity to prompt students into becoming lifetime readers. It is time for teachers to use the switch provided by research to turn students on to reading. (Eighteen references are included.) (PRA)

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Teri S. Lesesne

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Teri S. Lesesne

Electric Reading: Powerful Books for Young Adults

There is a growing body of research which indicates what young adults like and want in their books. Buckman (1989), for example, surveyed over 300 middle school students, asking them what qualities they wanted and/or liked in the books they read. Students overwhelmingly cited three characteristics. Middle school students reported that they wanted: (1) humorous books or books containing an element of humor, (2) books full of mystery and suspense, and (3) real stories about real people. If we listen to what our students tell us, we should be better able to recommend books which will provide satisfactory reading experiences for our students. By connecting students with books which possess the qualities they like, we can switch our students over to reading for pleasure. The purpose of this article is to briefly present the qualities and characteristics students want and like in their reading and then to suggest contemporary titles which exemplify these qualities. Matching students with appropriate books helps turn students "on" to reading; this electric reading is what encourages lifetime readers. As this "Year of the Lifetime Reader" draws to a close, we need to continue to identify those books whose features provide powerful reading for young adults.

Middle school students want books with humor. They comment that, even in serious fiction or problem novels, humor is a desirable element. There are many humorous books available for the young adult reader. This years' Texas Bluebonnet Award winner, Aliens for Breakfast (1989) by Etra and Spinner, is one prime example. Students in grades four through six were almost unanimous in their voting. Over 10,000 votes were cast for this book across the state. The story of a young boy who assists an alien in rescuing the

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planet from the dreaded Dorfs is wild and hilarious. Why this book was popular with readers is no puzzle; it is light and easy to read, the type of book a reader could consume as a bedtime snack. The 1991 Newbery winner, Maniac Magee (1990) by Jerry Spinelli is also a wonderful example of a humorous book for adolescents. Maniac's many feats of derring-do and the legends which they engender should make this a popular book for years to come. Maniac's ability to survive and overcome enormous obstacles is a serious tale, but comic relief is provided aplenty through his encounters with a variety of rib-tickling characters and situations. Gordon Korman is well known for his humorous books for young adults and Losing Joe's Place (1990) is no exception. The story of three adolescent boys living on their own for the first time one summer contains scenes guaranteed to make the reader laugh out loud. Even the first jobs these boys find, processing sheets of plastic into bubble wands, is replete with humorous possibilities which are plumbed to the fullest by Korman. How these adolescent boys "lose" Joe's place, or apartment, is a story only Korman can tell this well. Walter Dean Myer's The Mouse Rap (1990) features a main character who looks at the world around him with a terrifically developed sense of humor. The adventures of Mouse and his "gang" as they seek to uncover hidden treasure in Harlem are truly amusing. Other authors whose works have endeared them to students looking for "funny" books include Ellen Conford and Paula Danziger. In Genie with the Light Blue Hair, (1989) students learn along with the protagonist that wishes need to be stated very carefully if disastrous results are to be avoided. Danziger's sequel to Everyone Else's Parents Said Yes (1989) entitled Make Like a Tree and Leave (1990) continues with the further exploits of Matthew. The opening scene in which Matthew and his chums attempt to create an Egyptian mummy using plaster of paris and a not-so-willing human subject are typical Danziger fare,

broadly slapstick and lots of fun.

Middle school students also expressed a desire for mystery and suspense in their reading. This finding was not startling. Gallo's (1984) study of adolescent reading preferences concluded that mystery and suspense were popular qualities in adolescent reading matter. The characteristics of mystery and suspense, moreover, were important to both boys and girls. These two qualities are evident in several riveting works appropriate for the young adult. The Newbery Honor book, The True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle, by Avi (1990) is one book which combines the elements of mystery and suspense. The terse opening lines tell young adults that they will be reading about a seventeen year old girl who stands accused of murder, a crime to which she readily admits. From its beginning hook to the astonishing conclusion, this book is certain to please middle school and high school readers. Another Avi book, The Man Who Was Poe (1989) also possesses the qualities of mystery and suspense. In this book, a young boy turns to Poe for assistance in locating his mother, aunt, and sister, each of whom has mysteriously disappeared. Avi is no stranger to the young adult reader who enjoys a good mystery. Another well known mystery writer for adolescents is Jay Bennett. In The Long Dark Corridor (1988), the story of a teenage girl's suicide, presents the reader with a mystery to be solved along with the protagonist who is racing to discover the answer before he, too, becomes a victim. A perennial favorite in the mystery genre is Joan Lowery Nixon and Whispers from the Dead (1990) is so popular that some middle school libraries have bought multiple copies which remain in constant circulation. Certainly the fact that the story is set in Houston is an attraction for this book as well. The story of a young girl whose near death experience has left her with an added gift keeps readers turning pages. Will our heroine discover the killer's identity before she, too, becomes a victim? Finally, Gary

Paulsen's Canyons (1989) presents an intriguing mystery to its protagonist and to the reader. Ferreting out the identity of the skull he has found on a camping trip becomes an obsession for the main character in this novel. Paulsen's use of dual narrative is a quality that makes this book appropriate for classroom reading and analysis as well.

Finally, students in middle school indicated a preference for stories about "real" people in "real" situations. Basically, students stated that they wanted to read about people like themselves who had problems similar to theirs. Sometimes labeled as problem novels, there are an abundance of these novels available for adolescents. The Wall (Bunting, 1990) is a picture story book about a young boy's visit to the Vietnam Memorial with his father; they are looking for the name of the boy's grandfather who was killed in the war in Vietnam before he was born. During this visit, the young boy encounters a veteran of the war, a troop of school girls on a field trip, and a grandfather with his grandson. In simplistic yet haunting language, Bunting manages to convey both the pride and the misgiving felt by the young boy who misses having known his grandfather. Though intended for younger audiences, this book is particularly appropriate for adolescents as they begin to explore their feelings and thoughts about war. While Susan Beth Pfeffer's The Year without Michael (1988) dealt with the problem of missing children from one perspective, Caroline Cooney's The Face on the Milk Carton (1989) presents a different viewpoint on the issue. The young protagonist in this novel finds a childhood picture of herself on a milk carton and then must struggle with the questions this raises. Why is her picture on the milk carton? Who are her parents? To whom can she turn? The premise for this book is certainly a startling one, one which has already attracted many adolescent readers. Nonfiction selections also present real people in real situations. A popular nonfiction example is Jill

Krementz's How It Feels to Fight for Your Life (1989). This book chronicles the stories of several children and adolescents who are locked in real life battles against terminal illnesses such as AIDS and leukemia. Their stories are real; no punches are pulled. Students frequently read these books to measure themselves against the people featured. Krementz has published several other books utilizing a similar format. Reading about real people whose lives are similar to theirs is interesting for young adults.

Young adult literature responds to and meets the needs and demands of adolescent readers. These books truly provide the electricity to prompt our students into becoming lifetime readers. It is time for us in the classroom to use the switch provided by research to turn our students on to reading.

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